

Finish the Enemy!

The Rifle Squad and Platoon focus

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Light infantry squads and platoons, once they take casualties, often have trouble maintaining momentum during search and attack operations.

The focus of units conducting a search and attack should be to find, fix, and finish the enemy. But the moment a unit sustains casualties, that focus shifts to treating and evacuating casualties. The unit loses momentum by not pressing the fight and pursuing the enemy, and then masses on ground that is already targeted by enemy direct and indirect fire systems. In addition, security is lacking because leaders are too involved in overseeing the treatment and evacuation of casualties to assign sectors of fire, position crew-served weapons, and establish observation posts.

According to Field Manual 7-8, *The Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, consolidation and reorganization is the last step in the squad and platoon attack drills. This takes place after the assault is complete.

Consolidation is most critical because it ensures that the unit is prepared for a counterattack. It includes assigning sectors of fire, positioning key weapons, developing an initial fire support plan against an enemy counterattack, employing an observation post, and taking up hasty defensive positions.

Reorganization—in addition to treating casualties and evacuating wounded—includes reestablishing the chain of command, redistributing ammunition, manning crew-served weapons, processing prisoners, and sending and receiving reports.

Many of these tasks can be done at the same time, and all of them in a matter of minutes; this is critical if the unit is to resume offensive operations fast enough to maintain the initiative.

A typical scenario might run like this:

A platoon departs friendly lines and begins to search its assigned zones for enemy. After searching for almost three hours, shots ring out; first squad is in contact. The squad immediately takes up good covered and concealed fighting positions and begins to return fire. The squad leader quickly assesses the situation and determines that he can effectively deploy his squad to finish the enemy.

After notifying the platoon leader of the contact, the squad leader begins to maneuver his squad against four enemy soldiers. As the squad begins to close with the enemy, the squad leader loses contact with one of his team leaders and hears calls for a medic echo down the line. The Alpha team leader has been wounded from enemy direct fire. The squad continues to engage the enemy. The SAW gunner goes down. But the squad has taken out two enemy soldiers as well; the two remaining enemy begin to withdraw from the area. Fire ceases. The squad leader notifies the platoon leader that the enemy has broken contact and that he has two friendly casualties, one of whom is litter urgent. He says he also has two enemy soldiers, one of them only slightly wounded.

The squad leader immediately calls for the aid and litter team to attend to and evacuate the casualties to the casualty

collection point. At this point, the focus of the entire squad changes from finishing the enemy to evacuating the casualties. As a result, the squad not only loses the initiative but also loses security when it is most needed.

The enemy, now monitoring the squad's activity, hears the squad leader's commands and begins moving back toward the squad. Soon enemy soldiers are engaging the squad; two well-aimed shots and the squad leader and the medic are both casualties. The platoon leader commits second squad. This forces the enemy to withdraw but not before they inflict another friendly casualty.

The platoon leader assesses the situation—six friendly casualties and two enemy. After notifying the company commander, the platoon leader orders his squad leaders to begin evacuating casualties. Now practically the entire platoon is focused on treating and moving casualties. Momentum has ceased. Suddenly, a volley of mortar fire pounds the platoon as it is massed around the casualties, causing four more casualties.

Units pride themselves on the notion that they will never abandon a fallen soldier to die or be taken prisoner. But infantrymen must keep in mind that their first priority is to close with and destroy the enemy. Performing duties as medics and combat lifesavers, though critical, is secondary. Field Manual 7-8 states that infantrymen provide initial treatment until medical personnel can treat casualties, but only after their primary task is complete. This does not mean they cannot perform triage

or treat casualties after medical personnel arrive if the tactical situation allows it, but if the mission is not accomplished, all of the soldiers themselves may become either casualties or captives.

Certainly, it is our moral obligation to do all that is possible to see that wounded soldiers are treated in a timely manner,

not only to prevent loss of life but to reduce suffering and prevent further injury. But if the treatment and evacuation of casualties becomes the focus of squads and platoons before the mission is accomplished, nothing is achieved except a greater number of casualties and the failure to finish the enemy.

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The IOBC Mentorship Program

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Today, most officers are familiar with the word *mentor*, which is defined as “a wise or trusted teacher,” and a newly commissioned second lieutenant gets his first taste of mentoring in the Infantry Officer Basic Course (IOBC).

IOBC is a rigorous 16-week course designed to challenge lieutenants and prepare them to serve as rifle platoon leaders. The program of instruction (POI) involves a significant amount of instruction at the small group or platoon level. Today, it is more difficult than the old basic course that many of us remember.

The structure of the 2d Battalion, 11th Infantry, supports this new POI and increased mentoring opportunities. Each company, depending upon class size, has two to five platoons, each trained by a captain as senior platoon trainer. Working for the captain are two noncommissioned officers (NCOs)—a sergeant first class and a staff sergeant.

All trainers are hand-picked by the battalion commander. The company commander, a major, is typically a former small-group instructor (SGI) from the Infantry Officer Advanced Course. With a former SGI as company commander, the senior platoon trainers instruct material they themselves learned in the Advanced Course, but focused at platoon level.

The importance of the platoon trainers in the development of the lieutenants can-

not be overstated. Each of these captains is under the scrutiny of some 30 lieutenants on a daily basis. The platoon trainers lead by example in all physical training and field training and teach a large portion of the classroom instruction as well.

The development of the lieutenants takes place daily, both formally and informally. Classroom instruction, social functions, dining-ins, formal receptions, and field time all figure into this development. This focused development, conducted by first-rate captains and senior NCOs, is the key to success in IOBC.

Still, the lieutenants also need a broader perspective from more senior officers. The Senior Leader Seminar was established for just this purpose. It allows lieutenants the freedom to question and learn from a colonel of infantry. Since a lieutenant assigned to a brigade usually does not have free access to his brigade commander, this program gives him a perspective he might not otherwise have.

Before each IOBC class, infantry colonels from Fort Benning volunteer to act as Senior Mentors. One colonel is assigned to each IOBC platoon. He meets initially with the platoon on the first Friday of the course, and the program calls for four one-hour periods of formal instruction throughout the remainder of the course. Most Senior Mentors also visit the

platoons in a field environment, conduct physical training with them, and host informal social functions. The program's strength is in its flexibility to mesh the POI with the Senior Mentor's wishes for interaction.

Topics of discussion range from fiscal responsibility to the Officer Efficiency Report (OER) to those qualities Senior Mentors expect an infantry platoon leader to display. At times, the Senior Mentors tutor their platoons on how to succeed in difficult operations; at other times, the conversations delve into less tangible themes such as the relationship between the platoon leader and the platoon sergeant. In each session, the conversations are free-flowing; colonels listen intently as lieutenants voice their questions and concerns. More often than not, the Senior Mentor does not offer a solution to a problem but uses his personal experiences to illustrate how he dealt with a similar problem.

The Senior Leader Seminar sets the stage for newly commissioned infantry lieutenants to experience mentoring firsthand. The program allows them to see just how helpful or illuminating a senior officer's experiences or knowledge can be. It also leads them to expect mentoring from their superiors when they reach their first unit of assignment.

Although IOBC provides the formal